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ABSTRACT

This article proposes the use of special education knowledge within a general education framework. Research on federal policies to achieve educational equity has shown that special education policies have created elements of an unequal educational system. Rural educators need to move beyond "special education" in rural settings, to address the entire range of student diversity in rural schools through a more comprehensive educational approach. This conceptual framework proposes to meet student needs beyond traditional special education categories while suggesting practical applications for rural educators to shape the classroom climate; to coordinate the instructional program; and to consider uses of rural language, history, and culture in the classroom. Rural school districts and teachers can be fully responsible for students, but they need not be solely responsible for meeting the diverse range of learning needs. Opportunities for the use of volunteer programs, business partnerships, classroom support services and support personnel should not be overlooked. This paper concludes that societal and familial complexities are no less significant in rural than urban schools, suggesting that separate programs or practices for each area of student diversity only perpetuates a fragmented system of service delivery. Contains 35 references. (TES)

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Student Diversity in Rural Schools:

Beyond "Special" Education

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Student Diversity in Rural Schools:

Beyond "Special" Education

Without question, P.L. 94-142 (The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975) increased services for rural students with special needs (Helge, 1984) and heralded greater numbers of qualified personnel and more service delivery options, related services, and educational materials for rural school districts. For rural students who previously had been placed in regional institutions or relegated to home-bound placements, P.L. 94-142, which provided the ticket for their public school entrance, indeed constituted a major rural educational accomplishment. However, the outcomes of special education practices across the nation have recently been scrutinized by advocates and policy makers (Gartner & Lipsky, 1987). Research on federal policies to achieve educational equity, including P.L. 94-142 (Sleeter & Grant, 1987) has shown that these policies have created a fragmented, separate, and unequal education system (Gartner & Lipsky, 1987). Persons in the field of rural special education cannot afford to hide from or defer the attacks upon the resulting separate system of service delivery. To avoid the "buckshot mentality" in meeting student needs (Sarason & Klaber, 1985), and to address the outcomes of special education services, rural teachers and administrators need to move beyond "special" education and address the entire range of student diversity in rural schools through a more comprehensive educational approach.

While urban schools receive much of the attention regarding student diversity, student diversity in rural schools is no less significant. The increasingly diverse student population in terms of minorities, students from disadvantaged families (Hodgkinson, 1988), and mainstreamed students with disabilities all challenge the struggling rural education system. The possibilities of pooling resources in rural schools from general education and equity programs, or merging general and special education (Lilly, 1988; Reynolds, Wang, & Walberg, 1987; Stainback & Stainback, 1984, 1985; Will, 1986) may assist rural school districts in providing a quality education for all students. With the cost of special education averaging 2.3 times more than general education programs, and the cost of segregated special education placements averaging over 31% higher than costs in less restrictive environments like resource rooms (Decisions Resources Corporation, 1988), rural administrators cannot ignore the option of restructuring general and special education in their rural districts to enhance student learning for all students.

Descriptions of exemplary rural programs have provided examples of how rural special educators are attempting to meet the needs of students with disabilities in general education classrooms (Helge, 1986; McKenzie, Hill, Sousie, York, & Baker, 1977; Singer, 1984; Williams, Fox, Christie, Thousand, Conn-Powers, Carmichael, Vogelbsberg, & Hull, 1986; Zeph, 1983).

However, rural school administrators and teachers need a broader framework in which to make decisions to impact upon all students within the entire educational program.

Specific Focus

Capper (1989a) proposed a conceptual and practical framework for rural school administrators to serve students with severe intellectual disabilities in the general education program. This article proposes an alternative conceptual framework that can address not only students with severe disabilities in rural schools, but can also include a broad range of learning needs in the general education classroom. In addition, the conceptual framework and the suggestions for practice are appropriate for rural special and general education teachers as well as for rural school administrators.

First the article will examine a conceptual framework for meeting student needs beyond traditional special education categorical services. Second, the article proposes practical applications of the framework for rural administrators and teachers which include (a) shaping the school/classroom climate, (b) coordinating the instructional program, and (c) considering the mediation of rural language, history, and culture. Finally, the use of resources to support administrators and teachers who are fully, but not solely responsible for all students in the local rural community will be described.

Conceptual Framework

One conceptual framework of principal instructional management behavior emanates from a synthesis of systems theories and is based on the research of effective schools and effective school leaders (Bossert, Dwyer, Rowan, & Lee, 1982). Seen as an interactive relationship rather than unidirectional, the framework depicts how the leader can influence the school climate and shape the instructional organization to impact positively on student learning.

Using the same instructional management framework, Capper (1989b) explored the reciprocal exchange between poor, rural communities, school leader behavior, and early childhood services for children with special needs. Capper suggested that the principal and teachers need to consider the language, history, and culture of the rural community and of the students, as mediating points between school climate and instructional organization (see Figure 1). This consideration is necessary to meet the needs of poor, rural students with

Insert Figure 1 about here

disabilities. By including service delivery for rural students with disabilities within a general education framework, school administrators and teachers can apply this framework to the entire sphere of student diversity in their schools. The

framework and its application can extend beyond the need to create more separate, special services, and "pull out" programs for the variety of students in rural schools.

Applications for Administrators and Teachers

Shaping the school/classroom climate. The rural school/classroom climate (e.g., the norms and expectations for students) can be supportive of all students. The school/classroom climate can encourage both supportive relationships as well as academic expectations for students to maximize their potential, regardless of learning needs (Sarason & Doris, 1979). Rural special education delivery models have supported removing students with variant learning needs from the general education classroom and serving them through pull-out programs in the school or by transporting students to out of district placements. Students and teachers cannot practice supportive relationships in the classroom if some members of the school community are absent, namely those with disabilities.

Administrators and teachers can apply the rural value system which emphasizes the importance of "community" to their schools and classrooms, and establish norms and expectations supportive of all students. However, for students with disabilities, merely being present in the classroom is not enough. Isolation and inequalities can persist even when the student is no longer physically separated from his/her peers.

Active participation and interaction can be expected of all students. The research and literature on social interaction among students with and without disabilities can inform this student interaction (Bednersh & Peck, 1986; Cole, Meyer, Vandercook, & McQuarter, 1987).

Coordinating the instructional organization. Coordinating the instructional organization in the rural school/classroom for students with special needs will require a consideration of both the process and the content of instruction for students. The IEP process supports input from a variety of persons concerning instructional strategies to meet student objectives. However, traditional rural special education delivery models (e.g., resource room, self-contained rooms) expected the special education teacher to be primarily responsible for both content and process decisions. Current research and literature suggest strategies for general curriculum integration for students from the continuum of diverse learning needs--from the more severely intellectually disabled student to students with mild learning difficulties (Duffy, 1988; Falvey, 1989; Wang, 1989). Administrators and teachers can integrate this curricular content with cooperative instructional practices. Thus the curricular content and instructional process become inextricably linked.

Considering language, history, and culture. The language, history, and culture of rural students can link the climate and

instruction surrounding student learning. These mediating variables between school climate and instruction can target both the rural context of the school as well as the concept of disability. Considering both rural context and disability in this part of the conceptual framework can be tools for addressing the range of diversity in rural schools.

The school/classroom climate can be supportive of the diversity of rural values in the community which are embedded in the community history and culture. Therefore, it is important that school personnel and students understand their rural history and culture. Similarly, the academic instruction can also reflect and support the language, history, and rural culture of the students and of the community. Wigginton (1985) and others (Giroux & McLaren, 1986) have advocated the primacy of student experience to inform classroom pedagogy, and have provided examples of this in practice. Rural history and information on local and state history can make inroads into the traditional "urbancentric" curriculum of rural schools.

It is also important that rural school personnel know the history of handicapism and the institutional apartheid of persons with disabilities in their rural community. It is also necessary to know the individual student's educational and social background, and discern how to sensitively share that information with the school community.

The importance of language as a mediating variable depends on the degree of cultural differences embodied in the rural community. Rural Hispanic, rural Appalachian, and rural Native American settings exemplify the importance of supporting the diversity of language in the school climate and academic milieu. Rural midwestern farming areas may have less obvious language differences than affluent urban settings, however the importance of local vocabulary is no less significant.

For rural students with disabilities which severely limit their verbal expression, the body of knowledge developed by researchers and scholars in the area of language development for persons with special needs (Dunst, 1985; Schiefelbusch, 1979; Siegel-Causey & Guess, 1989) can be tapped to support these students in the rural school. Rural school leaders and teachers can be receptive and open to communicative intent which goes beyond verbal articulation, and for students with profound intellectual disabilities, extends beyond a formal augmentative system. An eye gaze, head turn, facial expression, body position, and vocal utterance have meaning, and for the rural student with severe intellectual disabilities, all constitute their language.

Fully but not Solely Responsible. One of the biggest inhibitors for rural teachers and administrators to serve students in the general education program, is the feeling that one teacher could not possibly meet all student needs in the

general education classroom or that the local rural school could not meet the needs of all students in the local community (Capper, 1989c), particularly those students with more severe disabilities. In addition, persons in the field of special education become unsure of their roles when students are educated in the general education classroom. While rural administrators and teachers can be fully responsible for students in rural communities, they need not be solely responsible for meeting the diverse range of learning needs.

First, rural administrators and teachers cannot overlook the fact that first and foremost, all students are more importantly human, and their common humanity exists before the disability. Capper (in press) found that rural districts scrambled to implement P.L. 94-142 by emulating urban service delivery models. Often rural administrators developed an entirely new transportation system and set aside separate space to group students with similar learning needs. In attempting to provide special equipment and services for students with intensive learning needs, these rural administrators neglected to furnish the students with the materials and services available to all other students in the community. Adequate materials, qualified teachers, access to information about the school for parents, and opportunities to interact with other students represented just a few of the components of a rural non-disabled student's school experience which were not

available for the students with special needs. Administrators did not consider what educational opportunities were currently available for all students in their districts and did not ensure that, as a beginning, students with disabilities were provided these same opportunities. Rural teachers and administrators can feel confident about their ability to enhance the lives of students. And by considering their students with special needs first, as students, they can move away from the notion that they are not "experts," and only highly specialized knowledge can meet student needs (Skrtic, 1988).

Second, although under the proposed conceptual framework, rural teachers and administrators are fully responsible for all students in the school and community regardless of student needs, school personnel are not solely responsible for all students. Rural special education is indeed a "gold mine" and can provide the network of support necessary for administrators and teachers. Rural education and special education strategies have also historically included utilizing community resources in the school, including volunteers and business partnerships. Resources at the school, community, region, state, and national levels can be tapped to provide the information needed to meet special student needs in the general education program. More typical classroom support services such as related services personnel (speech, guidance, physical therapy) can share their

expertise within alternative programming models such as transdisciplinary teaming (Campbell, 1987; Lyon & Lyon, 1980).

Summary and Conclusion

Rural administrators and teachers cannot deny the demographic realities in rural schools today. Societal and familial complexities are no less significant in rural than in urban schools. Creating a separate program or practice for each area of student diversity only perpetuates a fragmented system of service delivery. This article proposed the utilization of special education knowledge within a general education framework, to move beyond "special" education in rural settings, and to address the range of learning needs within the general education program in each child's local community.

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Figure Captions

Figure 1. Student diversity and an instructional management framework.

